

EXPERIMENTAL • ART • FOUNDATION

ART IN CHILE

MARGINS AND INSTITUTION



Lotty Rosenfeld, *Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento* (A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement),
art action before the presidential palace, La Moneda, in September 1984.

AN AUDIOVISUAL DOCUMENTATION

ADELAIDE FESTIVAL

March 1986



This exhibition was made possible thanks to the generous assistance of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, the Adelaide Festival, the Experimental Art Foundation, Francisco Zegers and the Santiago video company VISUAL.

ART IN CHILE

FOREWORD

Chilean art in Australia? Perhaps it might be thought that this exhibition presents recent handcraft, photography or popular art from that country. On the contrary: it does not comprise objects, but rather documentation, ephemeral works, and critique. It includes slide shows, sound, "talking heads" videos and art videos, and a publication. It presents a number of contexts for our understanding of work executed in Chile over the last ten years.

The intention of *Art in Chile* is to open up, engage with, develop and continue cultural debate and discourse, to provide a rare opportunity to see not only the cultural production of another country, a production which has occurred under a very different set of circumstances, but also to examine that set of circumstances and its parallels with the Australian and international situation.

An integral part of the exhibition is the text by Nelly Richard, called *Margins and Institution: Art In Chile Since 1973*, of which the introduction is reproduced here. This publication will be published in full by Art & Text in association with the Experimental Art Foundation in the middle of this year.

Art in Chile is the product of many individuals, without whose contribution the end result would have been quite different. All of these contributors need to be acknowledged and thanked. Thanks must first and foremost go to all the Chilean artists and writers whose work is covered in the exhibition. Also to be thanked is Nelly Richard, who is a French-born art critic living in Chile. Her book attempts to discuss the many issues raised by this exhibition, reflecting her intimate knowledge of the artists and writers concerned and the circumstances under which they continue to struggle.

The forthcoming publication owes a considerable debt to

Francisco Zegers for his generosity in editing, providing design and photographic services in Santiago. Appreciation is also in order for the video producer VISUAL, Juan Enrique Forch and Nelly Richard for their work on the video elements of the exhibition. Special thanks are due to Ana María Lopez for her assistance with the slide program. Major financial support for the exhibition and publication has come from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and the Adelaide Festival.

The exhibition is co-curated by myself, Juan Davila and Nelly Richard. But without the commitment of Juan and Nelly the project would never have been conceived, or indeed have reached maturity.

The content of this exhibition addresses recent Chilean history, in particular the aftermath of the fall of Allende, the subsequent mode of government, the games with language and images necessary to a regime of censorship... but the message is universal. The text itself is based not only on the Chilean experience, but also attempts to explore this experience and offer a metaphor for any society, even for Australian society, concerning what can happen when artists undertake to contest their society. Who cannot draw parallels with the Australian "coup" of 1975?

Art in Chile is therefore about needs, frailties, communication, institutions and the margins that exist in between the structures of power. But it must be remembered that margins also have the power to define, expose and ultimately shape those structures.

Louise Dauth
Director
Experimental Art Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Art in Chile is an audiovisual presentation of documentary material (slides and video) referring to the art scene in Chile.

The thirteen slide shows comprising one part of the exhibition were commissioned from historians, artists, photographers and poets with the aim to articulate the different documentary and artistic registers or contexts. These slide shows, made possible through the technical assistance of Ana María Lopez, are grouped together as follows:

A Documentation of Artworks

- "Murals and Popular Graphics of the APJ (Young Artists' Association)"
- "Pintura joven en Chile" (a selection of young Chilean painters by artist Gonzalo Díaz)
- "El grabado: extensiones y desplazamientos" (an analysis of engraving, its extensions and displacements by the artists Duclos, Aguilar, Paredes and

Soro)
— "Objeto-Instalaciones" (the historian Gaspar Galaz analyses the art object and its installations)

Photographic Registers and Social Documentation

- "Las mujeres mapuches" (the writer Sonia Montecino documents the indian women of the Mapuche tribe)
- "Paz Errázuriz: Fotografa" (work by the woman photographer Paz Errázuriz)
- "El Caribe [y sus ofertas]" (photography of Ana María Lopez)

Creative Supports

- "Performance" by the artist Carlos Leppe
- "Godoy" and "Baquedano" by the artist Eugenio Dittborn
- "No, no fui feliz" (No, I wasn't happy) by the artist Lotty Rosenfeld
- "Por una nueva épica" (Towards a New Epic) by the writer Gonzalo Muñoz
- "Vagamente famosos" (Vaguely Famous) by the writer Diamela Eltit.

The video "Art in Chile: Context and Interventions" forms the other part of the exhibition. It is divided into three sections. The central section, called "Soportes culturales" (Cultural Supports), consists of material filmed in Santiago during November and December 1985, and includes a documentation of exhibitions or events (a poetry recital, a round-table discussion and a video performance) as well as

interviews with artists who were exhibiting their work at the time. This section attempts to make manifest the many different types of cultural activities in Chile. The other two sections try to situate the art scene in both a geographical and sociopolitical context. The first, "Paisajes" (Landscapes), juxtaposes fragments of images taken from videos which form an intervention in the Chilean landscape (those of CADA or the Art Action Collective, Rosenfeld, Dittborn, etc.), whereas the third, "El cuerpo social" (The Social Body), recontextualises images from other videos (those of Eltit, Leppe, etc.) and inserts them in a documentary format designating aspects of the national social and political life.

In contrast with the middle section, the first and third sections of the video use images as signs which, rather than documenting the specific works to which they refer, communicate the tensions existing between one work and the other, between the works and their landscape, between the landscape and events, between the real and creativity. The information presented here is quoted from videos already in existence, but by that reason it will help to provide a commentary on the associations they formed between different realities and contexts.

Both the slides and the video primarily function to extend and complement the information contained in the book accompanying the exhibition, *Margins and Institution*, so as to pluralise its perspective and confront it with parallel or alternative discourses.

Nelly Richard

MARGINS AND INSTITUTION*

* This text is the introduction to Nelly Richard's *Margins and Institution: Art In Chile Since 1973*, to be published by Art & Text in association with the Experimental Art Foundation.

The movement of artistic production in Chile addressed by this text refers to the field of unofficial works produced under the military regime. Only one of the many dimensions of this field is discussed here: that of the so-called "avanzada", which questioned to the utmost the meaning of art and the conditions or limits of its practice within a highly repressive society. The *avanzada* dared to gamble on a form of creativity that would disrupt the order imposed on language by the figures of authority and their grammar of power. It proposed to reformulate the link between art and politics beyond any mechanical correspondence or illustrative dependency, beyond any categorical subordination of language to ideology, but in a manner that could at the same time counteract the privileged and idealistic divorce between the aesthetic sphere and the social sphere (and its web of oppressions) which absolves the former from any responsibility to criticise its own effects of dominance.

What undoubtedly characterises the *avanzada* are the specific circumstances under which it emerged. It irrupted at a time of total catastrophe, when all sense floundered, not only because of the failure of an historical project, but also because of the breakdown of a whole system of social and cultural references which, for Chileans up to 1973, provided

the clue to all reality and thought. Once this system and its social organisation was dissolved, language itself and the quality of interchange had to be reinvented.

In fact, the coup that shattered the whole preceding framework of social and political experiences also disintegrated the models of signification operating in the language that named those experiences, a language thereafter deprived of its capacity to designate or symbolise what became after all a real crisis of intelligibility. Once the subject was divorced from that reality, once the code was shattered and the link between the sign and its interpretation was broken, the only alternative was to reformulate new ties in order to recover that sense of historicity which had become irreconcilable with the grand history of the victors.

Thus the *avanzada* can be understood as a detonation of the mine field of language and representation, and only the concept of the fragmentary, with its ellipsis of a disunited totality, is able to give an account of the dislocation experienced by the subject portrayed as a unity of irreparable fragments.

The conscious need to surpass this upheaval in the whole social structure of language and thought makes the

operator of signs wary of anything given as secure or permanent; anything guaranteeing a legality of meaning or a normality of communications becomes suspect because of its complicity with the system. For this operator no sign is free of error or forgery since the foundation of the new code, in the absence of a genuine consensus, has an illegitimate basis. No axiomatic — of knowledge, power or common-sense — could liberate the subject from the doubts inherent in a system of social representation, or remedy the crisis of truth in its fictions of coherence or stability.

Thus the relentless reformulation of signs carried out inside art by the *avanzada*, which was driven to revise every expedient of verification, to deconstruct every artifice of representation serving tradition and its sleight of hand. This fraudulent inherited tradition only resurrected the past in order to provide an origin for the imposture and to maintain a continuity for its practice. Thus the need arose to destroy what that tradition assumed to be definitive, to question the immutability of the rules of production constraining the work to a unique genre and to open up the conventions delimiting its support or format, to re-examine the dependence of the art object on those institutions not only administering its distribution and consumption, but also its official inscription and acceptability. Above all, the need arose to restructure the language of creativity so that the artwork could be a potentially dissenting force against authority and its norms for regulating meaning.

After the coup in Chile, the various ruptures not only affected the social body and its community network, but also represented history in a way that could be easily assimilated. But no history, nor any transcendental conception of it, remained that was not entirely discredited by the revelation that it was only a tissue of lies. Yet for the Chilean artist, neither the official history of those in control nor the non-official history of those under control, which in the mirror of suffering becomes just as much inverted or righteous, was sufficient to guarantee any logical coherence or finality of interpretation.

Therefore, split over the failure of these two histories to challenge the present and its teleology of action or discourse, caught between the repressive official history on the one hand and the negative history of its victims on the other (as emblems of the popular national resistance), the *avanzada* scene in Chile emerged through a constellation of works which, inscribed in the living materiality of the body and its social landscape, proposed a new topology of the real. Such works aimed to demystify a transcendental use of time and the treasure-trove of history, by continuously opposing continuity with a mobile and anti-accumulative tempo.

The figures constructed by the *avanzada* were more utopian than utopian. Rather than overcoming reality by a fictional or imaginary "non-place" lost to an uninhabitable here and now, the works postulated from within art practice the placeless distance separating the real from its desired other(s); they postulated the exploration of this nomadic distance as a calculated disruption of the prevailing systems, as an infraction of the norms and disciplinary techniques which controlled meaning, as an act of dissent.

All along the *avanzada* tried to resymbolise the real by means of new keys, not only those of social signification, but those of a reintensified collective and individual desire as well. Its choice of the body as a material for performance art, or else the use of the city and its urban system in street art, refers to a reassignment of critical values to all the zones of experience constituting everyday social practice, or to the production of critical interventions in these zones encompassing the body and its landscape as scenarios of self-censorship or micro-repression.

The exclusion under the authoritarian Chilean regime of the "political" as a category of action and discourse shifted prohibitions from the public sphere to the individual or private sphere: in return, everyday practices were overburdened with a clandestine and uncontrollable surplus of meaning. The familial sphere or domestic and social life became the new territories of a reappropriation of the political category. Thus the body and its immediate landscape were conquered all over again by means of new sign

systems of desire or rebellion transferred to the social fabric and its micropolitics of perception, of action or behaviour, of affection and emotion, of interpersonal communication. These Chilean art practices thus had a specific and differential meaning, specifying their distance from references borrowed from overseas: body art, documentary art, community art, etc. It is always necessary to emphasise the strategies used by marginal or peripheral cultures to disorganise and reorganise the forms of meaning transmitted by dominant cultures, to overturn them, to invert the international model in its encounter with a situation that is all out of proportion to its jurisdiction.

The *avanzada* in Chile was also marked by another circumstance, that of censorship and its internalised version, self-censorship. This left its trace on the art practices enunciated by the *avanzada*. By assuming that language is a danger zone to be tread very carefully, the Chilean operators of art codes were only too well aware of the fact that any construction of discourse involves a strategy of meaning. Hence the self-reflexivity of the language put to the test or side-tracked by their work, hence their inventiveness regarding artifice or dissimulation, their travesty or "transvestism" of the practice of language, which they distorted through rhetoric or dressed up with ellipsis and metaphors.

Added to the rigour with which their work pursued anti-institutional manoeuvres was the way they illuminated it with a passion for ornamentation or the figures of makeup. Hence the fascination with duplicity and the intrigues of meaning reflected in their poetics of ambiguity, in the vertigo of seduction behind their construction of linguistic emblems.

Such an occultation of the clues to reading used by these art practices was so productive that it became their distinguishing feature. Yet if transferred to a context without censorship, if taken to a less repressive environment, the temptation exists to restore transparency to these works born of censorship, to eliminate the camouflage by which they had tried to protect themselves, as though it were now superfluous. For the international spectator, who is generally unaware of the circumstances defining such works, the impulse to restore clarity to them is tantamount to reading them as symptomatic of the Chilean situation. This reading relies on the documentary aspect of the work and pays little attention to its socio-political context, often scorning the constitutive dimension of the game with signs invented by these practices, not only as a means of survival but also as a strategy of resistance against the hegemonies of meaning.

Caught between the risk of official absorption of their meaning by the dominant apparatus, and the danger of their forms being used as an instrument of the opposition's progressive ideology, these practices in fact insisted on an equivocal type of message. Thus they proliferated signifiers to combat a reductionism of interpretation, they pluralised possible readings under the sign of multiple, fluctuating referents.

It is true that the *avanzada* occupied a difficult position by not fitting into the scene of the Chilean socio-cultural reconstruction, a position of course that conflicted with the regime just as much as it remained marginal to the ideology of the opposition. It was this very strategy of producing heterodox signs which made it non-functional or unassimilable to the cultural programs of the left. Its constant dismantling of meaning was a critique of the whole ideology of discourse and party structures. This marginality of the *avanzada* intensified its destabilising function. Being part of the scene of crisis which produced it, it also played with it, reflected and interpreted its context, disrupting the categories of experience, language and thought which organised the surface of the real.

Chastised by the regime as well as marginalised under the political reconstruction movements, the art of the *avanzada* was also excluded by the international art circuit, which usually ignores anything occurring outside its own sphere of influence. Thus its double marginalisation (national and international), which contributed to the erasure of a whole sequence of works deprived of legibility because the clues to their significance became obscured.

Under these circumstances, even the mere fact of accepting the existence of this art is equivalent to rescuing it. But this does not mean an act of compassion or solidarity. Any attention given to this art has to bear in mind, and almost assume as a basic premise, the difficulty of seeing it from within an international context.

On the one hand, this art has suffered the inevitable destiny of any body of work coming from peripheral cultures, which is easily condemned as imitative, as simple or outmoded copies of the international models. Hence the colonialist judgment of "désà vu", and the habitual lack of attention given to the critical labour of distorting and twisting the received or imposed forms by these marginal operators, a labour which reveals a reluctance to observe the disciplines forced upon them.

On the other hand, the entry of *avanzada* art into the international circuit happened at a time when, ruled by postmodernist aesthetics, it abandoned as naive or simplistic all critical and social motives for art, particularly the experimental forms of *avant-gardism*, in order to assert a neo-pictorial subjectivism. What inevitably marks the emergence of secondary cultural forms is the curse of backwardness, condemning them to either obsolescence or the failed rhetoric of the *avant-garde*. Such categories of artistic judgment elaborated by the centralism of the dominant cultures should be reassessed as depending on the particular conjunctions of meaning in inflections of discourse corresponding to each socio-cultural formation: the critical value of a work emerges in the way it relays local and specific effects of signification within its own sphere of social and historical pertinency.

In a country like Chile, however, where institutions are not only guardians of order but also agents of destruction, it is more difficult to accept an art which, in being pleasurable, no longer questions its complicity with these institutions. By ignoring the possibility of altering the structures of social regulation, and by abandoning the tools of analysis and criticism which would enable it to dismantle the machinery of automatism and the submission to order, this art of the pleasurable fails to oppose the various discourses of subjugation spoken by power.

Of course, the forms of criticism articulated by postmodernism are not uniform. They encompass dissimilar and even contradictory tendencies in the marked division between "a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction".² But even in its most political aspect, regarding the need to dismantle the ideological appropriation of social discourse, postmodernism remains curiously aloof from anything outside the limits of its own culture and its self-representation, from anything capable of displacing the limits of inclusion or exclusion of references within its own historical framework. This is undoubtedly a paradoxical omission in the current tendencies of postmodernism, since it disregards the manoeuvres of marginal or peripheral discourses, which are perhaps in a better position to deconstruct the techniques promoted by it and to improve or reactivate the effectiveness of its critical motivations. In fact, cultural works on the border or margin of the system, where artists are simply condemned to repeat the signs of their own invalidation by language and the call for identity, exacerbate their ability to respond to it and recapture what it denies through an illusory exercise of simulacra, except to maintain a life and death struggle for the right to exist. Certainly it is in the colonisation of native tongues, those of

women or of subjugated cultures, it is in the persecution of censored voices that the imitative and parodic devices often celebrated by postmodernist aesthetics are most illuminating. Repressed by the dominant apparatus of signification and annexed to that domain, these stifled tongues filter through the surface of the ruling code, aping its figures all the better to overturn them, copying its model to subvert it anew as its counter-memory, as its repressed but transgressive double, as its opaque inverse, as its disguised other.

Similarly, the tools of deconstruction which the *avanzada* inherited from poststructuralism (quotation, cut-outs, montage, collage, etc.) and which allow a combinatory and redistributive use of the text of culture, were vital to its task. Only by fragmentation and assemblage, only by reconstituting the heterogeneous sources of information and the discontinuous frameworks of reference, only by disarticulating the dominant system of knowledge, only by interstitial practices could it rebel against the systematic foreclosure of utterances excluding the "other", or any bearers of a difference.

It is true that these Chilean works had to find ways to trick the institutions of power through a whole repertoire of duplicitous figures; they had to be expert in parodic manoeuvres or strategies of appropriation. They also had to be alert to the politics of representation, that is to say, they had to depart from any nostalgia for immediacy or transparency of a pre-given "reality". But even so, they maintained their distance from the nihilistic rhetorics related to, say, Baudrillard's "end of the social". In a context where the failure to counteract the manipulations of power is equivalent to the perpetuation of a status quo and its legalised form of violence, the aesthetics of indifference or disenchantment runs the risk of concealing, behind its hyperconformism to the spectacle of the real, an intolerable repressive mechanism.

The problem of Chilean art discussed here attempts to engage with this aesthetics and even challenge it from within a context where it is only possible to experiment with the transformation of reality, to reorder the codification of the real so as to make it intelligible and feasible, to use creativity as a force to undermine the language of dominance, to de-authorise the meaning of the regime and its policies of repression which imposed on the individual and the collective body its metaphors of terror and misery.

Nelly Richard

1. This is simply an operative term. It covers the work carried out by Chilean artists engaged in a counter-institutional practice from 1979 to the present. But more generally, the essay is concerned with art in Chile since the fall of Allende in 1973.

The outline presented here is very fragmentary. The bias revealed in the selection of texts and photographic reproductions obviously does not pretend to either exhaust the meaning of such works or the role they played in the scene at large. Also, there are many other aspects to this scene not included in the essay. It only takes up some of the more relevant lines of force traversing its field of production: the intervention in the social body linked to notions of event and time, the blurring of genres and disciplines, the practice of the body as a transcoding vehicle of marginal experience and discourse, etc. It has been decided to retain the Spanish term "*avanzada*" in order to avoid any confusion with the nostalgic connotations of the word "*avant-garde*".

2. See *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, London, Pluto Press, 1985, p. xxii.

ART IN CHILE

MARGINS AND INSTITUTION

The exhibition will tour Australia during 1986
under the auspices of the Experimental Art Foundation
to the following galleries:

EXPERIMENTAL ART FOUNDATION (Adelaide)

PRAXIS (Fremantle)

ARTSPACE (Sydney)

INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART (Brisbane)

GEORGE PATON GALLERY (Melbourne)

CHAMELEON (Hobart)